



State Capitol | Lansing, Michigan 48913

PH (517) 373.7708 | FAX (517) 373.1450

www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/senator/gilbert/

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 1, 2003

Contact: Scott Starr
517-373-7708

Public Testifies on Chemical Spills in River

Many agree new system for notification is needed

ST. CLAIR—Local residents and environmental specialists testified Tuesday night on the lack of notification of chemical spills in the St. Clair River, state Sen. Jud Gilbert (R-Algonac) announced today. Testimony was taken by the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs, Sen. Gilbert and state Rep. Dan Acciavatti (R-Chesterfield).

“Tonight’s discussion was very informative and I believe now, more than ever, that we need to upgrade the spill notification procedures and work toward a real-time water monitoring system,” Gilbert said. “There’s no question this will require a significant financial investment, but we’re talking about people’s lives here.” Gilbert said.

A recurring theme revolved around the need for a real-time water monitoring system to replace the voluntary human reporting system currently in place. The real-time system would have points along the river to automatically detect chemicals that had leaked into the river, report the concentration of the chemicals and notify local authorities.

“The science and technology exists today to give us this information in two to five minutes with the system capable of recognizing between 65,000 and 80,000 different kinds of chemicals,” said Dr. Carl Freeman, Professor of Biological Sciences at Wayne State University. “Voluntary reporting is fatally flawed and we need a system that works.”

“Notification should be automatic, not a judgment call by personnel not familiar with the chemicals or the spill area,” said Mark Richardson, Macomb County Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for Water Quality. “It would be a worthwhile investment to get an automatic computer system and ultimately a real-time monitoring system.”

Local resident Thomas Morrison feels there is a serious communication problem. He said he lives on the river and can hear the alarm bells go off when chemicals have been spilled. “We get out our binoculars and watch the Canadians get out their boats and containment booms. But we never get any notification except a small report in the local paper a week later and sometimes the smell of sulfur.”

-more-

Other testimony concerns involved the need for quick notification of spills to protect the safety and health of residents who live along the river that drink and play in the water.

“My concern is that we have a network of public health officials that fit into this response system,” said Dr. Bonnie Taffe, Assistant Professor of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences at Wayne State University. “Residents who come in contact with chemicals need to be monitored if they begin to feel dizzy, nauseous, have headaches or break out in a rash.”

The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) noted that they are working on a three dimensional model to predict the fate of chemicals in the river and are studying a real-time system in place in the Ohio River to determine if it gives reliable results.

“We realize that there’s room for improvement in our current notification plan and we are willing to work with specific communities on spill concerns in the meantime,” said Bryce Feighner, DEQ District Supervisor of the Water Division.

The Committee is currently working on Senate Resolution 148 sponsored by Sen. Gilbert that urges the United States and Canada to develop greater communication and stronger safeguards for quicker notification of chemical spills in the Great Lakes. This resolution is scheduled for a vote before the Senate Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee next week.